



THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR
PUBLIC POLICY AND
HIGHER EDUCATION

Policy Alert

August 2008

QUICK LOOK ...

- ★ The number of Americans who believe that higher education is essential for a decent job and place in American society has jumped from 31% in 2000 to 50% in 2007.
- ★ The majority of Americans (59%) believe college prices are rising as fast or faster than prices for health care.
- ★ Seventy-eight percent of Americans believe that students have to borrow too much money to pay for college.
- ★ Although 86% say that someone willing to make enough sacrifices can go to college, most (62%) also believe that many qualified individuals don't have access to higher education.
- ★ Concern about access is much higher among minority parents. While 62% of them believe that a college degree is necessary, 74% think that many qualified and motivated students don't have the opportunity for a college education.
- ★ Higher education still gets good marks from the public: 51% give it a grade of good or excellent, compared to 37% for secondary schools.
- ★ Regardless of this generally positive view of higher education, more than half of people surveyed (52%) think colleges are like a business, focusing more on the bottom line than on education, and almost half (48%) say they want to overhaul public colleges.

IS COLLEGE OPPORTUNITY SLIPPING AWAY?

Parents and the Public Voice Concerns About Higher Education Access and Affordability

There is a growing perception among the public that they are caught in a bind when it comes to higher education. Polling from a recent report called *Squeeze Play: How Parents and the Public Look at Higher Education Today*, from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and Public Agenda, revealed a considerable unease, because, while ever larger numbers see a college education as an absolute necessity for success in today's world, many believe that opportunity for higher education is slipping out of reach for a growing number of individuals.

"In recent years, there has been a dramatic growth in the perception that college is not only important but is absolutely essential for success in today's economy."

Nevertheless, these concerns remain in the background, and tend not to be seen as a top priority. A number of factors have prevented the public from going into a panic about higher education availability, but people are increasingly nervous. Higher education leaders might be well advised to get out in front of this issue before the situation comes to a head.

THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

"At this point in time, a lot of places, in order to even chicken pluck, you need to have an undergrad degree. I was looking at something last year, a call center for a credit union. Just for the call center alone, they wanted a graduate student."

—Focus group participant in Detroit, Michigan

For the entire period that we have been tracking public opinion, Americans have always felt that higher education is important, and have been nearly unanimous in thinking that a young person is best advised to pursue a college education rather than take even a good job out of high school (see Figure 1).

But in recent years, we have also seen a dramatic growth of a new value, one that asserts that college is not only important but is absolutely necessary for success in today's economy. The number of people who think that a young person can succeed without college has dropped from 67% in 2000 to 49% today (see Figure 2).

From the public's point of view, in other words, a higher education has become the essential admission ticket to be considered for a high quality job (see Figure 3). A good job, in turn, is seen as the pathway to middle-class status. As a result, the public has come to regard access to higher education as a virtual right (see Figure 4 on page 3).

"To me, it's unfair to that person who is smart and qualified and can't go to college, because his door is closed, where maybe another child's isn't. If you tell him he can't get a college education, you've almost handicapped him."

—Focus group participant in Denver, Colorado

Figure 1.

Americans have emphasized the importance of a higher education for a number of years.

Should high school graduates go on to college because in the long run they'll have better job prospects, or should they take any decent job offer they get because there are so many unemployed people already?

Percent who say that high school graduates should go on to college:

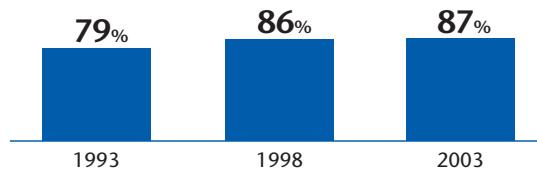


Figure 2.

The percentage of Americans who believe someone can succeed without college has fallen steadily, down 18% since 2000.

Do you think that a college education is necessary for a person to be successful in today's work world, or do you think that there are many ways to succeed in today's work world without a college education?

Percent who say that:

■ College is necessary. ■ There are other ways to succeed.

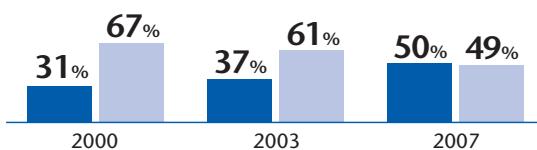
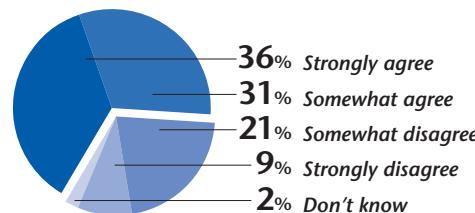


Figure 3.

The majority of Americans believe employers are less likely to hire people without degrees even though they could do the job.

Do you agree or disagree that a lot of employers hire college graduates for jobs that could be done as well or better by people without a college degree?



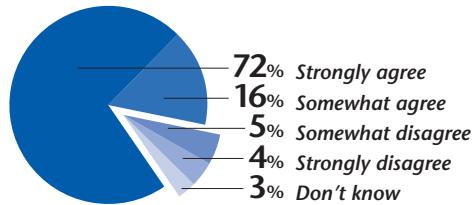
Note: Question wording in charts may be slightly edited for space. Full question wording is available from the National Center at www.highereducation.org. Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

To deny a qualified and motivated person access to a higher education is to say to that person, in effect, "You cannot be a full member of American society." And the public increasingly values college not just for the credential, but for the substantive learning as well, with 66% saying that colleges are teaching students the important things they need to know (an increase of 13% since 1998).

Figure 4.

Nearly 9 in 10 Americans see access to higher education as a virtual right.

Do you agree or disagree that we should not allow the price of college education to keep students who are qualified and motivated to go to college from doing so?



THE GROWING CONCERN ABOUT ACCESS

The increase in the public's commitment to the necessity of a college education has been accompanied by growing fears that, for many qualified and motivated students, access to a higher education is slipping out of reach.

This feeling of being caught in a "squeeze play" between growing importance and declining opportunity is driven, in large part, by the public's reaction to the escalating price tag for a college education. Nearly 60% of Americans believe, correctly, that higher education prices are growing as fast or faster than the prices for health care (see Figure 5).

"I know there's so many young people now that have gone to college, and now they're saddled with these high loans, and the next 5 or 10 years of their life is just impossible. They're handicapped, you might say, by trying to pay off the loans."

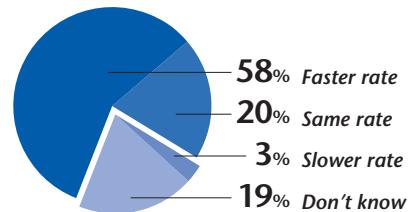
—Focus group participant in Detroit, Michigan

People are aware that financial aid is available (mostly in the form of loans), but 78% agree, either strongly (60%) or somewhat (18%), that students have to borrow too much to pay for higher education (see Figure 6).

Figure 5.

In comparison to the following, are college expenses going up at a faster rate, at a slower rate, or at about the same rate?

Compared to other things:



Compared to health care:

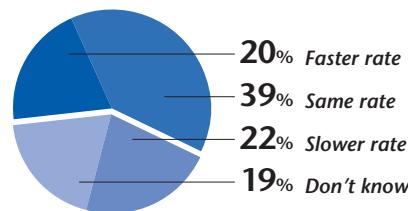
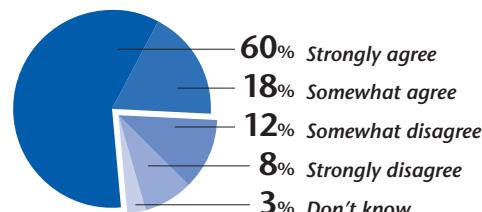


Figure 6.

A large majority of Americans believe students have to borrow too much.

Do you agree or disagree that students have to borrow too much money to pay for college?



As a result of these cost increases, the percentage of people who believe that many qualified individuals do not have access to a higher education has also been rising steadily over the last decade, up from 45% in 1998 to 62% in 2007 (see *Figure 7*).

Indeed, this percentage is the highest we have seen, greater even than in the recession years of the early 1990s. It is important to point out that this high-water mark on college anxiety was reached even *before* the recession talk of 2008. Today, that number might well be even higher.

While all Americans are feeling the pinch, anxiety is at the highest level among African Americans and Hispanics, who are significantly more likely to feel that a higher education is necessary for success, *and*, at the same time, are much more likely to believe that higher education is becoming less available for many motivated and qualified individuals (see *Figure 8*).

Figure 7.

The number of Americans who say many qualified, motivated students don't have an opportunity for higher education is at an all-time high.

Percent of public saying that many people who are qualified don't have the opportunity to go to college:

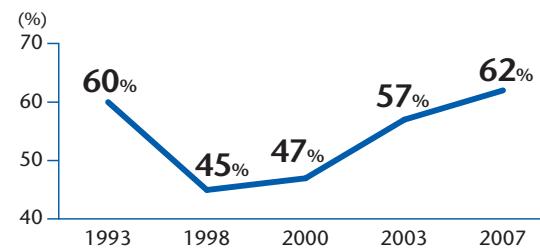


Figure 8.

There are significant disparities of opinion between racial groups when it comes to the importance of a college education and the accessibility of college.

	2007 (% within Race)	WHITE PARENTS	BLACK PARENTS	HISPANIC PARENTS
Do you think that a college education is necessary for a person to be successful in today's work world, or do you think that there are many ways to succeed in today's work world without a college education?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ College education is necessary ★ There are ways to succeed without a college degree 	55% 44%	54% 46%*	68% 33%*
Do you think that currently, the vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so, or do you think there are many people who are qualified to go, but don't have the opportunity to do so?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Have the opportunity ★ Don't have the opportunity 	43% 56%	16%* 84%	33%* 67%
<small>*Note: Because the number of respondents holding the less popular view in each of these questions is small, the percentages are not statistically significant.</small>				

PRESSURE VALVES

Given that there is a collision course between the increasing necessity and the decreasing availability of higher education, one might expect that higher education access would be at the top of the public's agenda. But higher education remains, at least so far, a back-burner issue—important, but not highest on the list of concerns.

One reason is the existence of “pressure releasers.” These are factors that tend to reduce public anxiety.

“When I see the kids who don’t work for college and have been handed everything, they don’t seem to have gotten anything out of their degree.”

—Focus group participant in San Jose, California

One of these factors, for instance, is the widely shared belief that, ultimately, any student who is willing to make enough sacrifices (such as going to school part-time, living at home, etc.) *can* still get a higher education (see Figure 9).

In other words, despite the fact that access to higher education is—for all practical purposes—slipping out of reach for more people, the door has not been completely shut. In fact, most people think that students who have to sacrifice for a higher education will actually learn more (see Figure 10).

The presence and accessibility of community colleges is another major factor that relieves anxiety.

Parents of high school students are extremely nervous about high costs and decreasing access, but large majorities of them remain convinced that their child will get a college education (see Figure 11) and that, somehow, they will find a way to pay for it (see Figure 12 on page 6).

“Many of the [auto] companies are losing market share by not embracing how much things have changed. They are arrogant, complacent, or in denial. It is the same in higher education. The rate of change in higher education is inadequate compared to the rate of change in the world around higher education.”

—Business leader interviewed for *Squeeze Play*

Figure 9.

Any students who really want to go to college can find a way to do so, if they are willing to sacrifice.

Do you agree or disagree that any students who really want to get a college education can do so if they’re willing to make sacrifices, such as going part-time, working, and living at home?

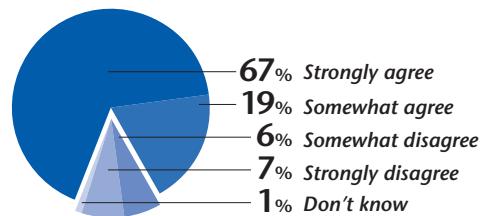


Figure 10.

Students who sacrifice to get an education learn more and appreciate their education more.

Percent who say they agree with the following:

■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree

Students who make sacrifices will appreciate college because they sacrifice to get it.

73% 19% **92%**

Students will learn more because they are more disciplined.

47% 26% **73%**

Students don’t appreciate the value of a college education when they have no personal responsibility for paying for it.

45% 22% **67%**

Students who sacrifice will miss out on the best parts of the college experience.

19% 27% **46%**

Figure 11.

Most parents of high school students expect their child to go to college.

How likely is it that your oldest child will attend college after graduating high school?

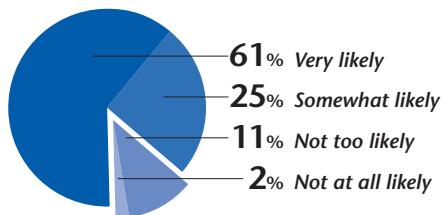
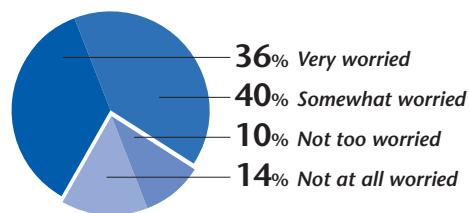


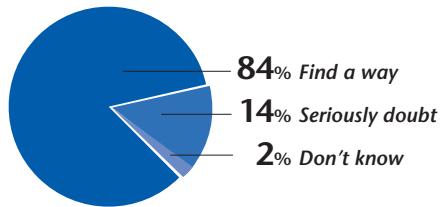
Figure 12.

Parents with children likely to attend college are worried about the cost, but even these parents think they will be able to make it.

How worried are you about being able to pay for college expenses?



Do you think that you will find a way to work the costs out, or do you seriously doubt that college will be affordable for your child?



THE BLOOM IS OFF THE ROSE, AND THE PUBLIC IS JUMPY

Although the public still has positive feelings about higher education, with 51% giving four-year colleges a grade of good or excellent (as compared to only 37% who give secondary schools similar grades), there are some signs of fractures in the public's long love affair with colleges and universities.

In focus groups conducted for this project, we heard, for the first time, a number of people saying that colleges and universities are "just like a business"—more concerned with money than with education (see Figure 13).

"There's a feeling in the Legislature that the university is relatively arrogant. They're not going to listen to anything you're going to say. Many times...the chancellors and the college presidents go in the direct opposite of what the Legislature wants. It almost seems like in spite."

—State legislator interviewed for *Squeeze Play*

Figure 13.

More than half of Americans say that colleges today are like a business, with an eye mostly on the bottom line.

Do you believe that colleges today mainly care about education and making sure students have a good educational experience, or that colleges today are like most businesses and mainly care about the bottom line?

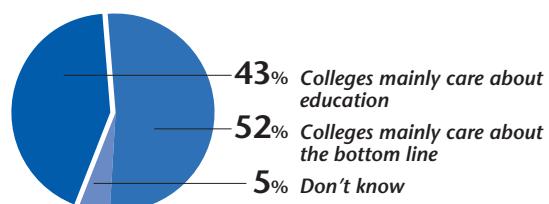
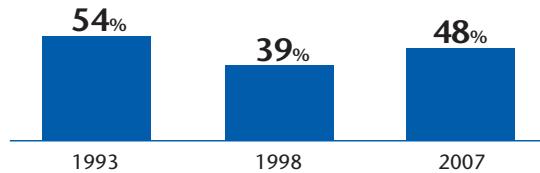


Figure 14.

Almost half of Americans say their state's higher education system needs to be completely overhauled.

Percent who say that their state's public college and university system needs to be fundamentally overhauled:



As it turns out, this is a perception held by more than half of Americans. The percentage of Americans who say that their state's higher education system should be overhauled has increased in the last 10 years. At the time of our survey, that belief had not reached the peak level seen during the recession years of the early 1990s, but with all of the recent talk of recession in early 2008, the number may have climbed even higher (see Figure 14 on page 6).

The public also has little sympathy for the difficulties that colleges face. A majority believes colleges could spend less money while still maintaining quality (see Figure 15), and also believes that colleges could take in more students without raising prices or lowering quality (see Figure 16).

Preliminary interviews with legislators and business leaders also reveal a growing impatience both with rising prices and with a perceived lack of flexibility and accountability in colleges and universities.

Figure 15.

More than half say colleges could spend less money and still maintain quality.

Do you believe that if colleges cut budgets too much to lower tuition, the quality of an education will suffer, or do you believe that colleges could spend a lot less and still maintain a high quality of education?

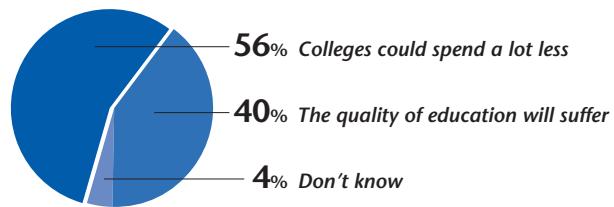
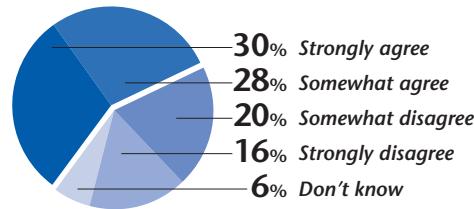


Figure 16.

Most Americans say colleges could take in "a lot more students" without affecting quality or increasing prices.

Do you agree or disagree that colleges could take in a lot more students without lowering quality or raising prices?



THE PUBLIC SUPPORTS MEASURES TO DECREASE COSTS WITHOUT HARMING ACCESS OR QUALITY

The situation is clearly not at a crisis point in the public's mind. The public is still much more concerned about K-12 than about higher education. However, although people have clearly not thought much about higher education, they do have some thoughts about policy measures.

Generally, the public favors measures that will decrease costs without harming either access or quality. One popular approach is to encourage a greater use of community colleges, which people believe do just as good a job for less money (see Figure 17; also see Figure 18 on page 8).

Figure 17.

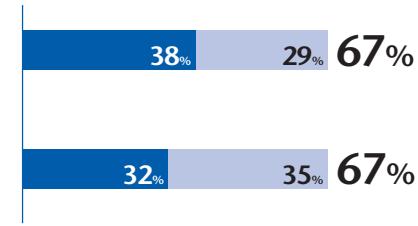
To keep costs down, most Americans favor more use of two-year schools and more long-distance learning.

Percent who favor the following, even though it may not offer them the full college experience:

■ Strongly ■ Somewhat

Relying more on community colleges for two years, and then finishing at a four-year college.

Having students take classes from home using computers, or on evenings and weekends.



"You don't have to go to [UC] Berkeley the first year. You can start at a community college. There are easy ways of doing it less expensively."

—Focus group participant in San Jose, California

The public also responds positively to the idea of students doing more college work in high school. People believe that a student can learn just as much in a college-level course taught in a high school (see Figure 19).

Other cost saving measures such as distance education and evening or weekend classes are also seen as a positive, with one caveat: While people support Internet courses for adults, they are less supportive of them for traditional-age students.

Finally, Americans tend to resist anything that they see as decreasing the quality of higher education or limiting access to it. Nearly two-thirds reject the idea of reducing the number of courses required for a degree, or of consolidating programs by closing regional campuses (see Figure 20).

Figure 18.

Most Americans think students can learn just as much at a two-year school as they would in their first two years at a four-year college.

Do you agree or disagree that students at two-year community colleges can learn just as much as they would in their first two years in a four-year college or university?

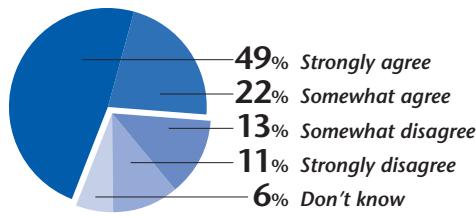


Figure 19.

Students can learn college material in high school.

Percent who agree that:

Taking college-level courses in high school is fundamentally the same as taking them in college.

55% 55%

Qualified students should take college classes in high school in order to hold down higher education costs.

56% 56%

Figure 20.

Most Americans reject reducing course requirements or closing state college branches as ways to cut costs.

Percent who say that they oppose:

Strongly Somewhat

Teaching fewer courses so students at four-year colleges and universities can graduate in fewer than four years.

42% 24% 66%

Consolidating programs by closing some branches of state colleges.

35% 30% 65%

THE NATIONAL CENTER AND PUBLIC AGENDA PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH SERIES

This *Policy Alert* is the most recent in a series of reports on public opinion research commissioned by the National Center and conducted by Public Agenda. Other studies include:

- ★ ***Squeeze Play: How Parents and the Public Look at Higher Education Today***, by John Immerwahr and Jean Johnson (May 2007, #07-4). This report explores how the American public views higher education today.
- ★ ***Public Attitudes on Higher Education: A Trend Analysis, 1993 to 2003***, by John Immerwahr (February 2004, #04-2). This public opinion survey reveals that public attitudes about the importance of higher education have remained stable during the recent economic downturn. The survey also finds that there are some growing public concerns about the costs of higher education, especially for those groups most affected, including parents of high school students, African-Americans, and Hispanics.
- ★ ***With Diploma in Hand: Hispanic High School Seniors Talk About Their Future***, by John Immerwahr (June 2003, #03-02). This report explores some of the primary obstacles that many Hispanic students face in seeking higher education—barriers that suggest opportunities for creative public policy to improve college attendance and completion rates among Hispanics.
- ★ ***The Affordability of Higher Education: A Review of Recent Survey Research***, by John Immerwahr (May 2002, #02-4). This review of surveys confirms that Americans feel that rising college costs threaten to make higher education inaccessible for many people.
- ★ ***Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African-American, and Hispanic—View Higher Education***, by John Immerwahr with Tony Foleno (May 2000, #00-2). This report finds that Americans overwhelmingly see higher education as essential for success. Survey results are also available for the following states:
 - Great Expectations: How Pennsylvanians View Higher Education* (May 2000, #00-2b).
 - Great Expectations: How Floridians View Higher Education* (August 2000, #00-2c).
 - Great Expectations: How Coloradans View Higher Education* (August 2000, #00-2d).
 - Great Expectations: How Californians View Higher Education* (August 2000, #00-2e).
 - Great Expectations: How New Yorkers View Higher Education* (October 2000, #00-2f).
 - Great Expectations: How Illinois Residents View Higher Education* (October 2000, #00-2h).
- ★ ***Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education***, by John Immerwahr (January 1999, #99-1). This paper reports the views of those most involved with decision-making about higher education, based on focus groups and a survey.
- ★ ***The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education***, by John Immerwahr (Spring 1998, #98-2). This report is a national survey of Americans' views on higher education.
- ★ ***Enduring Values, Changing Concerns: What Californians Expect from Their Higher Education System***, by John Immerwahr (March 1997 # 97-1). *Enduring Values, Changing Concerns* revisits many of the same issues discussed in *The Closing Gateway* through another statewide sample of opinions. This report shows which attitudes endured from 1993 to 1997, and which changed in response to new developments in the state.
- ★ ***Preserving the Higher Education Legacy: A Conversation with California Leaders***, by John Immerwahr with Jill Boese (March 1995 # 95-3, ED #381069). Based on interviews with 29 California leaders regarding their views of higher education, this report highlights major findings, including a concern that the policy discussion in higher education and the state has become insulated and ineffective.
- ★ ***The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System***, by John Immerwahr and Steve Farkas (September 1993 # 93-6). This report includes the results of a statewide survey of Californians to better understand public values and expectations for higher education.

These reports can be obtained by visiting the National Center's Web site at www.highereducation.org, or by calling the Center at (408) 271-2699.

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education promotes public policies that enhance Americans' opportunities to pursue and achieve high-quality education and training beyond high school. As an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, the National Center prepares action-oriented analyses of pressing policy issues facing the states and the nation regarding opportunity and achievement in higher education—including two- and four-year, public and private, for-profit and nonprofit institutions. The National Center communicates performance results and key findings to the public, to civic, business, and higher education leaders, and to state and federal leaders who are in positions to improve higher education policy.

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